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Reagan Denies U.S. Is Trying to Topple Nicaraguan Regime With Arms to Rebels

By a WALL STREET JOURNAL Staff Reporter

WASHINGTON—President Reagan, trying to quell growing congressional uneasiness over his Central American policies, denied his administration is trying to overthrow Nicaragua's leftist government.

In a brief White House news conference, Mr. Reagan leveled blistering criticism at Nicaragua's leaders, accusing them of fomenting revolution in nearby El Salvador. But he also insisted that his administration is complying with a congressional mandate that bans sending any covert aid to military groups for the purpose of toppling the Nicaraguan regime.

"We aren't doing anything to try and overthrow the Nicaraguan government," Mr. Reagan declared. At another point, he insisted: "We are complying with the law . . . We're complying with that fully."

Mr. Reagan spoke a day after the House Intelligence Committee announced it will summon Secretary of State George Shultz and National Security Adviser William Clark next week for a confidential explanation of U.S. activities in Nicaragua. Chairman Edward Boland (D., Mass.) said the panel has "deep concerns" that the administration is violating the congressional ban on aid aimed at a Nicaraguan overthrow.

Rep. Boland sponsored the amendment that Congress passed last year barring such aid. But in recent weeks, armed bands that claim to have gotten U.S. help have infiltrated Nicaragua and fought sporadically with government troops.

Mr. Reagan didn't directly address a question about whether the insurgents are getting U.S. aid. But he seemed to support an explanation other officials make privately: The U.S. is providing some covert aid to armed groups around Nicaragua, but only so those groups can block shipments of arms from Nicaragua to leftist rebels in El Salvador.

"Anything that we are doing in that area is simply trying to interdict the supply lines which are supplying the guerrillas in El Salvador," Mr. Reagan said.

One way the U.S. has been trying to track air shipments of arms from Cuba to Nicaragua and from Nicaragua to El Salvador, officials said last night, is to periodically dispatch Awacs radar planes to the area. The White House stressed that the planes have never violated any country's territorial airspace.

The president's argument is an attempt to convince lawmakers that the administration has met their concerns, even though it might be continuing covert operations in the area. Mr. Reagan tried to further douse speculation that the U.S. is backing an attempted overthrow by insisting the small bands fighting the Nicaraguan government aren't nearly powerful enough to topple Nicaragua's growing army.

The rebel forces consist of only a "few thousand" guerrillas and Miskito Indians, who live in northern Nicaragua, he said. "I don't think it's reasonable to assume that kind of a force could nurse any ambitions that they can overthrow that government," Mr. Reagan asserted.

It isn't likely, though, that Mr. Reagan's explanation will still the unrest in Congress. Many lawmakers believe the armed groups reportedly receiving U.S. aid want to do more than simply stop arms from leaving Nicaragua.

Rather, some in Congress charge, those groups openly proclaim that their goal is to seize power in Nicaragua. So, the lawmakers assert, the administration is violating at least the spirit of the Boland amendment if it aids groups that have goals beyond arms interdiction.

While insisting his administration isn't aiming to overthrow Nicaragua, Mr. Reagan did little to hide his disdain for the leftist government there. He charged that it has "become completely Marxist."

With Soviet and Cuban help, he said, Nicaragua has built "the biggest military force in all of Central America and large parts of South America." And he said it is thus possible Nicaragua may someday get advanced Soviet fighter jets.

But he was vague when asked whether he would like to see the Nicaraguan government replaced. "What I might personally wish, or what our government might wish, still wouldn't justify us violating the law of the land."